



Aethiopica 4 (2001)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

ROCHUS ZUURMOND

Article

The Textual Background of the Gospel of Matthew in Ge'ez

Aethiopica 4 (2001), 32–41

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

The Textual Background of the Gospel of Matthew in Ge'ez¹

ROCHUS ZUURMOND

A-text and B-text

The Gospel of Matthew exists in two early distinct Versions: 'A-text' and 'B-text.'² The A-text is the earlier of the two. It was translated from the Greek not later than the 6th century A.D. The B-text presupposes the A-text and consequently is younger than the A-text, but apart from that very difficult to date. It could be a thorough reworking of the A-text or even a new translation by someone who had the A-text in mind. The *siglum* 'aeth' in the editions of the Greek New Testament by TISCHENDORF and LEGG³

¹ Paper read at the XIVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, November 6, 2000.

² See my forthcoming edition of the Gospel according to Matthew.

³ C. TISCHENDORF, ed. *Novum Testamentum Graece (Octava Maior)*. 3 vols. (Leipzig: Gieseke, 1869–1884). S.C.E. LEGG, ed. *Novum Testamentum Graece. Evangelium secundum Matthaeum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940).

The following Ancient Versions are mentioned. **Syriac** (Peshitta): P.E. PUSEY and G.H. GWILLIAM, eds. *Tetraevangelium Sanctum juxta simplicem Syrorum Versionem* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910). **Old Syriac**: AGNES SMITH LEWIS, ed. *Old Syriac Gospels* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1910). **Coptic**: G. HORNER, ed. *The Gospels of S. Matthew and S. Mark*. Vol. I of *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911). (Repr. Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1969). G. HORNER, ed. *The Gospels of S. Matthew and S. Mark*. Vol. I of *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialect* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1898). Repr. (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1969). HANS-MARTIN SCHENKE, ed. *Das Matthäus-Evangelium im Mittelägyptischen Dialekt des Koptischen [Codex Scheide]* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1981). **Old Latin**: ADOLF JÜLICHER, ed. *Matthäus-Evangelium*. Vol. I of *Itala. Das Neue Testament in Altlateinischer Überlieferung*. Revised by W. MATZKOW and K. ALAND. [zweite verbesserte Auflage] (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1972). **Arabic**: PAUL DE LAGARDE, ed. *Die Vier Evangelien Arabisch aus der Wiener Handschrift herausgegeben* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1864). (Repr. Osnabrück: Otto Zeller Verlag, 1972).

refers to a Ge'ez text of the B-type. In the most recent edition of the United Bible Societies⁴ eth^{ro} and eth^{pp} usually refer to a B-text, whereas eth^{ms} and ethTH more often than not point to a text akin to the A-text.

The A-text is based on two manuscripts from Abbā Garimā (II, 44–50). A precise date of these manuscripts is difficult to establish, but 12th century or earlier is a safe estimate. That makes them the earliest extant Ge'ez manuscripts. The B-text is mainly based on a 14th century manuscript from Dabra Māryām (II, 58–59). The text of ms. Vatican Etiop 25, which is by and large the text collated by TISCHENDORF and LEGG, is also a B-text, but somewhat influenced by the A-text and late medieval conflation of A-text and B-text, called 'C-text'.⁵

Using these group distinctions one should be aware of the fact that there are no such things as a 'pure' A-text and B-text. The texts are continuously developing. The *sigla* eth^A and eth^B represent their group only at a given moment in time, i.e. the 11/12th and 13/14th century respectively.

Characteristics

The A-text as a translation is typically a first draft. One could call it a 'wild' text. It translates very 'freely' and slightly simplifying. It exhibits many dual readings (the same Greek word or expression translated differently) sometimes only one or two verses apart. This is a phenomenon not unknown from other early Versions, but as far as the abundance of dual readings is concerned the Ethiopic Version (A-text) is unique. Going some way in explaining the large number of dual readings would be the theory that the original translator used bits and pieces of existing translations, possibly produced *ad hoc* for liturgical purposes.

A conspicuous characteristic of the Ethiopic Version (*i.e.* A-text and somewhat less B-text) is strong harmonization, both contextual and synoptic. It seems that if — for one reason or another — the translator wants to deviate from his *Vorlage*, he prefers to borrow his text from another part of Scripture, preferably from a synoptic parallel. As a consequence an A-reading in Mark might well originate from Matthew and *vice versa*.

⁴ Fourth revised edition, 1994.

⁵ The earliest example of a C-text can be dated in the second half of the 13th century. See for all details my *General Introduction* (I) and *Edition of the Gospel of Mark* (II) in *Aethiopistische Forschungen* 27 (1989), here referred to with Roman Capitals I or II followed by the relevant page(s).

Many examples could be given of ‘free translation’ in the A-text. They have been summed up in the General Introduction of the edition of the Gospel of Mark:⁶ the addition of explicit subjects and objects to verbal forms, a preference for parataxis, the rendering of passive forms by means of the third person plural of the active, the addition of explicit objects and subjects, the addition of emphasizing words like ‘all’ and ‘much’. Most of these occur in other Versions as well (notably in the Syriac Versions, the only other early Semitic translation) and even in Greek manuscripts, but nowhere are they as prolific as in the A-text of the Ethiopic Version. The B-text, almost from verse to verse removes these translational liberties and renders much more literally in accordance with the Greek.

Sometimes there are signs of a cultural bias. To name a few examples. In 9:19 (part of the story of the Ruler who asks Jesus to come to his house) the Greek text says: “And Jesus rose and he followed him with his disciples” (καὶ ἐγερθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠκολούθησεν⁷ αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ). The question is: who rises (*i.e.* takes the initiative) and who follows whom. The Greek text, having both verbs in the singular, suggests that Jesus follows the Ruler. The translator may have found this undignified so he interprets ἠκολούθησεν as a plural (‘they followed’) and changes the order of the procession: “And Jesus rose and his disciples followed him too”. Now the parade is in reverential order: Jesus, taking the initiative first, then the Ruler and the disciples. Some 8th/9th century copyist of the Greek text obviously had the same problem and solved it in the same way. So does the Peshitta⁸. It is possible that the translation of the A-version relies on them, but that looks rather unlikely. The B-text, like the Greek (and basically the Old Syriac⁹), suggests that Jesus follows the ruler: “And Jesus rose and he followed him, with his disciples”.

The same reverential sentiment may well underlie 12:50, where the Greek has ‘my brother and sister and mother’, which the A-text changes to the apparently more socially acceptable order ‘my mother and my brother and my

⁶ I, 49ff. See footnote 5.

⁷ Some mss. read ἠκολούθει (impf) for ἠκολούθησεν (aor), but that does not solve the problem of the Ethiopic text. A few mss. read ἠκολούθησαν (‘they followed’) like the A-text and the Peshitta (see note 9).

⁸ The Peshitta reads the final verb in the plural ‘And Jesus rose, with his disciples, and they followed him’.

⁹ The Sinai Palimpsest (the Curetonian is missing) reads: ‘And our Lord rose, went with him, he and his disciples’.

sister'.¹⁰ Matthew 20:13 'I have agreed with you' instead of 'You have agreed with me' (it occurs also in some other Versions) probably has the same cultural background.

It is not always the A-text that looks adapted for cultural purposes. In 20:24, where the mother of James and John asks for the places of honor for her sons, the Greek text tells us that the other disciples 'were indignant' (ἠγανάκησαν). The A-text translates appropriately 'they were angry'. That, however, could be seen as a breach of the apostolic exhortation (e.g. Eph. 4:31). The B-text softens the tone somewhat by translating 'they were distressed'. Similarly the Itala has 'contristati sunt'. The Old Syriac Sinai Palimpsest, like the Arabic 'Alexandrian Vulgate', also softens the tone: 'they murmured'.

Finally mention can be made of 27:28, where the soldiers mock Jesus. Remarkably both the A-text and the B-text uniquely suppress ἐκδύσαντες αὐτόν ('they undressed him'). One wonders whether this was done out of reverence. Some early Greek copyists seem to have had the same dilemma. They replaced ἐκδύσαντες by the text-critically unlikely ἐνδύσαντες; the equivalent is done by a number of ancient Versions. The Ethiopic does the same, but also shortens the rest of the sentence ('and they dressed him with a crimson cloak'), on this occasion more or less following the shorter parallel text of Mark 15:17.

There are also examples of a theological bias. Most prominent is the fact that in the A-text Jesus hardly ever 'asks'; apart from the odd rhetorical question he always 'tells'. I suppose texts like John 3:25, 6:6 and 16:30, expressing Jesus' omniscience, influenced the translator. It has often been observed that the 'Jesus' of Orthodoxy (and largely of Christianity in general to this day) is basically the Johannine 'Jesus'.

Theologically by far the most interesting case is Matthew 24:36 '*Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*'. Many ancient authorities omit 'nor the Son', but all Ethiopic manuscripts I have seen include these words, with one exception: the beautiful 15th/16th century Gospel from Dāgā Estifānos. Where this omission came from one can only guess. Obviously not from the indigenous Ethiopic tradi-

¹⁰ Some nouns in the plural. The parallel text in Luke 8:21 omits the sister and mentions only (in that order) 'mother and brothers'. Ms e of the Old Latin Version has 'mother and sister and brother'.

tion. I suspect an Arabic text like the ‘Alexandrian Vulgate’ reflecting a Syriac or a Coptic Version.¹¹

Signs of editing

The two Abbā Garimā manuscripts are very much akin. That is unusual. Copyists of Ethiopic Gospel manuscripts work in a very eclectic way and they usually copy from new manuscripts rather than from old ones. The consequence is that texts in manuscript tradition grow apart very quickly. It is obvious therefore that both Abbā Garimā manuscripts go back to a common archetype, textually at not too great a distance from each other.

The few differences between the two Abbā Garimā manuscripts do not point to a heavily edited A-text. This however is a conclusion based on lack of evidence. The gap of half a millenium between the first translation and the earliest manuscript is a reminder that we are by no means sure that the Abbā Garimā manuscripts, although arguably the best we have, truly represent the autograph of the translation (if there ever was one).

The earliest manuscripts of the B-text are on the whole again remarkably uniform, although there are blatant exceptions in portions of the Vatican manuscript.¹² Things are different however when we look at the early C-text (end of 13th century). C being a conflation of A and B, one might argue that ‘B equals C minus A’. In the majority of cases that applies. But in a few cases this rule results in a hypothetical B-text which differs from our received B-manuscripts. I therefore conclude that the B-tradition contains more than one layer and that our B-text is probably the result of a 13th century revision. We know for sure that some sort of B-text existed in the 12th century because clear B-elements appear in a 12th or early 13th century manuscript from Lalibela.¹³ Unfortunately there is not enough material to make a clear decision concerning the exact shape of an assumed ‘proto-B-text’.

Applying ‘A equals C minus B’ is more difficult because we are not always sure what ‘B’ exactly is. However, the C-text incorporates the A-text very much in the form we have it in the early A-manuscripts.

¹¹ Peshitta and Vetus Syra omit the words and so do Coptic manuscripts (as far as I know from Schenke and Horner).

¹² Ms. EMMML 6907.

¹³ Also in manuscript EMMML 6907 probably of the same period, which unfortunately I found too late for it to be incorporated in the forthcoming edition.

The type of Greek text underlying the A-text

There can be little doubt that the A-text is a translation of a Greek original. I mentioned most of the evidence in my Introduction of Mark (I,124–132). Going through the text one keeps finding indications. For example I recently noticed a reading in the A-text which apparently is based on a *homoioleuton* in the Greek. In 9:28 “καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς Πιστεύετε” the A-text omits the explicit subject ὁ Ἰησοῦς, which is very unusual. The omission becomes clear, however, when one realizes that the Greek text must have read ΑΥΤΟΙΣ ΟΙΗΣ (ΙΗΣ being a *nomen sacrum*) which easily leads to the omission of ΟΙΗΣ, that is ὁ Ἰησοῦς. The same mistake is made in the Sinai Palimpsest of the Old Syriac and a number of minuscules. Theoretically the A-text could be a translation of Syr^S, but since there is little indication of influence of Syr^S on eth^A this is rather unlikely. The translator of the A-text must have misunderstood his Greek or used a Greek text in which the omission already existed.¹⁴

Comparing the A-text with a number of key Greek Manuscripts one finds that eth^A in roughly 3/4 of the cases goes with the Greek ‘Majority text’¹⁵ and in about 1/4 of the cases with the ‘Egyptian’ text.¹⁶ One could also point at elements of the ‘Western’ text¹⁷ and the ‘Caesarean’ text, but they are not really significant. Besides, there is a lot of overlap in these categories. As far as ‘Western’ readings is concerned I found that in the vast majority of typical ‘Western’ Greek variant readings the Ethiopic A-text follows the Majority text rather than the ‘Western’ text. One also hardly ever finds a typical ‘Western’ variant of the Greek supported by the A-text. In Matthew, on the basis of

¹⁴ Other examples of misunderstanding the Greek somewhere down the line of transmission are: interpreting ἦδη as ἴδε in 3:10 (A-text and B-text), 14:15, 14:24 (B-text), and translating δυοβάστακος (23:4, A-text) with ‘double to carry’ as if the Greek read διαβάστακος (iotacism). Also caused by iotacism is the interpretation of λιμοί as ‘pestilence’ (λοιμοί) in 24:7 (A-text); the B-text has the common doublet ‘famine and pestilence’.

¹⁵ Defined by Nestle/Aland and virtually identical with the ‘Byzantine text’ of the 4th edition (1993/94) of *The Greek New Testament*, (footnote 3).

¹⁶ I borrow this term from earlier editions of the Greek New Testament, meaning the Greek text as edited by Westcott and Hort (basically codex B).

¹⁷ ‘Western’ understood in its traditional meaning of Greek Codex Bezae + some Syriac + some Old Latin.

my sample, I could not find a permanent and statistically significant relation with one particular Greek manuscript.¹⁸

I conclude therefore that the A-text was based on a Greek text of mixed character, not yet completely dominated by the 'Byzantine' type. That is not a strange conclusion because the traditional categories (Alexandrian, Byzantine, Western, Caesarean) are difficult to define exactly and — as we know e.g. from early papyri — relatively early texts labeled 'mixed' when described in these categories are not unusual.

The type of Greek text underlying the B-text¹⁹

The indications look contradictory. On the one hand the B-text is much closer to the Greek than the A-text. For that reason one cannot help assuming a Greek *Vorlage*. A number of mistakes that can ultimately only be caused by Greek iotacism points in the same direction.²⁰ On the other hand the B-text 'semiticizes' some of the Hebrew or Aramaic proper names and a few loan words, which might point to the influence of a Semitic Version. We should sincerely consider the possibility that both may apply, either at the same time or consecutively. All through the history of the Version Ethiopic scribes and copyists have been using as many manuscripts as they could lay their hands on. They were mostly Ethiopic manuscripts, but why not at times a Greek text and another Version as well? There usually was enough opportunity for contact.²¹

The basic uncertainty about the provenance of the B-text remains, but there are a few things we can say with some measure of certainty. One, already mentioned, is that the B-text presupposes the A-text. The huge number of similarities cannot be coincidental. In theory the development could be the other way around (the A-text being a thorough revision of the B-text) but this is very unlikely. For one thing: the A-manuscripts are earlier, but more importantly: revisions use to bring a 'wild' local text more in accordance with an official and widely received text; not the other way around.

To try and bring a little more clarity in the problems of interdependence I selected distinctive variant readings, choosing in particular those cases where

¹⁸ In some parts of the Gospel of Mark one notices a remarkable level of agreement with codex W (the Freer Codex, nr. 032). In Matthew (A-text) too one finds typical agreements with W, but their number is not really significant.

¹⁹ I slightly modify my opinion expressed in I, 68–72.

²⁰ Matthew 3:10, 14:15, 14:24. See note 14.

²¹ I, 39, 91f., 110f., 114.

there is a clear distinction between A-text and B-text as well as clearly distinctive variant readings in the apparatus of the Greek text. Once all typical A-renderings described above, every obvious inner-Ethiopic corruption and every translation that neither in the A-text nor the B-text has an equivalent in a Greek manuscript or early Version²² has been discarded, not more than a little over one hundred are left.²³ These have been collated against some key Greek manuscripts (notably \aleph , B, D and W) and against the most important early versions.²⁴

Analyzing the results the first thing one notices is again the huge number of unique readings in the A-text, even after discarding all typical A-renderings mentioned earlier. In more than 1/3 of all cases where the A-text is distinctly different from the B-text the A-text has a reading without any equivalent either in Greek manuscripts or the ancient Versions.

The next thing one notices is that there is (direct or indirect) clearly dependence on the Greek Majority text in the A-text as well as in the B-text. It is, however, stronger in the A-text. One finds on average twice as many places where the A-text supports the Greek Majority text than places where the Greek Majority text is supported by the B-text.

It also appears that in those cases where B corrects the A-text, the B-text is frequently supported by Greek Codex \aleph (Sinaiticus) and almost invariably supported (occasionally even *uniquely* supported) by one of the Syriac²⁵ or Coptic texts. The latter points to Arabic influence rather than direct to Syriac or Coptic. The similarity with the Syriac might to some extent account for the so called 'Western' readings (note 17), detected by Hackspill²⁶ and others in the Ethiopic Version. In my sample the so called 'Western' elements are indeed substantially more prolific in the B-text than in the A-text.

That may well be true, but before jumping to conclusions we should take into account the undeniable fact that the B-text has also many more 'Egyptian' readings than the A-text. In particular the \aleph -element is remarkable. Typical 'Egyptian' readings (therefore excluding readings shared with the

²² Unique readings in the B-text are very rare, but some do exist, e.g. in Matthew 14:24 (cf. notes 14 and 20) and 23:3.

²³ The list is too long to publish here, but I may eventually publish it on the Internet.

²⁴ Syriac Peshitta (PUSEY & GWILLIAM) and Old Syriac (BURKITT and SMITH LEWIS), Coptic Bohairic and Sahidic (HORNER), Old Latin (JÜLICHER²) and the Arabic 'Alexandrian Vulgate' (LAGARDE).

²⁵ There is a slight preponderance of the Sinai Palimpsest, but it is hardly significant.

²⁶ L. HACKSPILL, Die äthiopische Evangelienübersetzung, *Journal Asiatique* 11 (1896), 117–196 and 367–388.

Majority text) are rather rare in the A-text and occur almost ten times more frequently in the B-text.

It is very hard to draw clear conclusions. One thing, however, is certain: the B-text is not a simple, straightforward translation, but a text with a complicated history. It remains a fair possibility that the B-text was made as an early²⁷ revision of the A-text on the basis of a Greek text of the 'Egyptian' type and that at a later stage, in the 13th or 14th century, this text was again corrected on the basis of an Arabic text which in turn reflected the Coptic and the Syriac Versions. It is also possible that the B-revision only depends on Arabic Gospels, translations of Syriac, Coptic and even Greek texts.²⁸ We know that these kind of Arabic Gospel texts exist, but most of them, apart from the 'Alexandrian Vulgate' (Lagarde, 1864), have not yet been properly edited and published.²⁹ A final verdict on the provenance of the Ethiopic Versions cannot be given before we have full access to all Arabic Versions.³⁰

The text of Mark

If the early tradition of Matthew exists in twofold: A-text and B-text, whereas Mark has only one text, is this one text an A-text or a B-text? The way to answer that question is to find typical A-translations and typical B-translations in Matthew and compare those with the published text of Mark. Obviously this must be done against the background of the Greek. Since the A-text is undoubtedly based on the Greek and the B-text is clearly dependent on the A-text, this does not necessarily harm the results.

In my Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew I quote a number of Greek words and expressions which in the A-text more or less consistently have been translated different from the B-text.

²⁷ There is no way to put a date to this assumed revision. Earlier than 11th/12th century is all one can say, but it could well be much earlier.

²⁸ I used Horner for the Coptic Versions, but to his edition much material has been added already, e.g. by Schenke, and new findings have been coming to light to this day. Prof. Schenke discussed new material from Codex Schøyen in a recent conference of Coptic studies in Leyden.

²⁹ I, 108 and 170f.

³⁰ This applies to the Ethiopic D-text and E-text (see end of paper) as well.

The Textual Background of the Gospel of Matthew in Ge'ez

The results of comparison are as follows³¹:

Greek Word	Occurrence in Mark	Mark has A-text	Mark has B-text
ἄπτομαι	7	7	0
θεραπεύω	6	3	3
ἱερόν	8	6	2
λέγων	36	31	3
πληρόω	3	2	1
πρεσβύτερος	7	5	1
Total	67	54	10

By a majority of about 5 to 1 Mark goes with A against B. Of course some of these examples may have been influenced by Matthew, but even then it is clear that Mark has predominantly the type of text which in Matthew has been defined as 'A-text'.

Why then is there no clear B-text in Mark? Comparing the A-text of Matthew with the text of Mark my impression is that the text of Mark is not as 'wild' a translation as the A-text of Matthew. The need for a revision therefore must not have been as urgent as in the case of Matthew. In a later stage, from the 16th century onwards, that changed drastically. Both the text of Matthew and Mark were revised frequently, apparently on the basis of Arabic Gospels. I publish two of those revisions, the 'D-text' and the 'E-text' of Matthew, in the forthcoming edition of that Gospel. For textual criticism of the Greek New Testament they have little value.

Summary

The Gospel of Matthew in Ge'ez has been handed down in two ancient Versions: A-text and B-text. The A-text is the earlier one, translated from the Greek and completed not later than the 6th century. It is a very 'free' translation, adapting the text not only to a Semitic vernacular but also to a new cultural background. The *Vorlage* of the A-text was rather close to the Byzantine type of text, but it has more readings in common with Greek manuscripts such as \aleph , W and B, than those commonly understood as 'Byzantine.' The B-text, although strongly influenced by the A-text, removes practically all translational liberties of the A-text. It contains readings that seem to have originated from Syriac or Coptic Gospels and therefore is probably a medieval revision of the A-text on the basis of Arabic Gospels. Existing European editions of the Gospel of Matthew by and large exhibit a B-text.

³¹ If adding up columns 3 and 4 results in less than column 2 the lacking examples are indecisive.